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ABSTRACT

Working from prior findings on the relationship between transgression, intent, guilt, and other factors, researchers reviewed a series of studies of undergraduate students. The students were offered varying hypothetical scenarios in which a member in a heterosexual relationship meets a friend of the opposite sex in a bar. In each case, after talking and drinking at the bar, the two people leave the bar to go to the friend's apartment to watch a movie, and end up having sexual intercourse. The varying factors in the scenarios were the sex of the transgressor, the degree of intent, the presence or absence of a revenge motive, and the degree of relational familiarity (the length of the relational partners' dating period). As one critic had speculated, the unintentional transgressor was more likely than the intentional one to feel guilt. Communication strategies which people use to explain their transgressions were quite consistent across studies, and data were consistent with one version or another of the sexual double standard. (Two figures are included; 25 references are attached.) (SG)

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ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR RELATIONAL TRANSGRESSIONS

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RUNNING HEAD: ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

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ATTRIBUTIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR RELATIONAL TRANSGRESSIONS

Abstract

This paper reviews a series of studies investigating attribution of intent, causal responsibility, moral responsibility, and guilt following relational transgressions. Across studies, we consistently found that the intent of a transgression is inversely related to the amount of guilt experienced following the act. Studies investigating the role of the consumption of alcohol and relational familiarity are also reported. Ancillary issues such as sex differences in attributions of responsibility and communication strategies used to explain transgressions are discussed. Research in progress and currently in the planning stage are outlined.

Attribution theory suggests that persons will be held to be both more causally responsible and morally responsible for intentional behaviors than for unintentional ones (Heider, 1958, McGraw, 1987). Considerable literature also indicates that feelings of guilt are positively related to causal responsibility, moral responsibility, and intentionality (DeRivera, 1984; Roseman, 1984; Shaver, 1985; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983).

Recently, some evidence contrary to these basic tennets of attribution theory has surfaced. For example, McGraw (1987) reports two studies examining attributions following relational transgressions, i.e., violations of relational norms resulting in a negative outcome to the relational partner. In the first of the two studies participants read short scenarios describing relational transgressions that vary the transgressors' intent, e.g., ruining a friend's blouse, losing money, embarrasment about a weight problem. In the second study participants recall a transgression in which they were either the transgressor or a witness, and are asked to describe and evaluate the transgression.

In both studies, higher levels of guilt are attributed after unintentional transgressions. These results are contrary to those predicted by attribution theory. McGraw (1987) speculates that with intentional transgressions the transgressor premeditates the act and rationalizes the behavior. With unintentional transgressions the transgressor has no time to develop a rationalization and so feels more guilt.

McGraw (1987) also adresses the relationships between moral

responsibility, causal responsibility, and guilt. The results show that causal responsibility and moral responsibility are positiely correlated with guilt and that the former relationship is stronger than the latter one.

These results were intriguing to us, and led us to speculate about attributions following other types of relational transgressions. As a result we have begun a program of related research, the progress of which is the focus of this paper. Initially, we began studying attributions following sexual infidelities, and did so for two reasons. First, sexual infidelities are perhaps the most greivous of relational transgressions (Pittman, 1989). There is nearly universal agreement that infidelities constitute serious rule violations. Second, sexual infidelities occur in approximately one-half of all marriages and dating relationships (Maykovich, 1976; Pittman, 1989; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). Later research in the program has varied the nature of the transgressions examined.

What follows is a description of completed studies, studies in progress, and anticipated future studies within this program of research. The studies are discussed in chronological order and should reveal the progression of our thinking the issues we address.

The Initial Study (Mongeau, Clason, and Hale, 1989)

Rationale

This study has two purposes. First, the study replicates McGraw's research finding a negative relationship between intent and guilt. Second, the study tests a causal model specifying interrelationships between, intent, responsibility, guilt, and other constructs. The hypothesized model

is shown in Figure 1.

Subjects

One-hundred-ninety-three undergraduate students voluntarily participated in this research. Sixty-seven students served in a pilot study of the scenarios and manipulations, while a separate group of 126 subjects participated in the final study.

Design

This study used a 3 (intent; low, moderate, high) X 2 (sex of transgressor; female, male) factorial design with independent groups. Intent and sex of transgressor were varied in scenarios. All scenarios described a member of a heterosexual relationship meeting a friend of the opposite sex (other than his/her partner) at a bar. After spending some time talking and drinking, they leave the bar together, go to the friends apartment to watch a movie, and end up having sexual intercourse. Once the transgressor reaches the bar all scenarios are identical.

Intent. In the low intent condition, one partner was described as away for the weekend visiting his/her parents, while the transgressor remained at home. After studying and watching television, the transgressor was described as going to a bar. In the moderate intent condition the transgressor was described as eating at a fast food restaurant when he/she meets same sex friends and goes to a bar with them. In the high intent condition, the transgressor discovers that his/her partner has been having sexual intercourse with a third party, argues with the partner, and goes to the bar hoping to find the opposite sex friend.

A pretest of the intent manipulation indicated that it significantly

and substantially affected perceptions of the transgressor's intent. Morover, the entire effect was explained by a linear functional form.

Sex of transgressor. Sex of transgressor was varied by changing the names of the transgressor and his/her partner (John/Jane), and the third party (Bob/Kim). All relationships and transgressions were described as heterosexual.

Results

Intent Manipulation Check. The intent manipulation exerted a strong influence over perceptions of the transgressor's intent. However, the effect was not linear and indicated that subjects did not differentiate the low and moderate intent manipulations.

Testing the causal model. These model provided an excellent fit to the data. The errors of prediction were trivial. The path coefficients are reported in Figure 1.

Discussion

These data are consistent with those from McGraw's study. As perceptions of intent increase, perceptions of guilt decrease. These data are also problematic. The scenarios used in the research confound intent with revenge. The low and moderate intent scenarios describe the transgressor as being alone because his/her partner is away. In the high intent scenarios the transgressor finds that his/her partner has committed a sexual infidelity. The revenge factor in the high intent scenarios may have provided an external justification for the transgression, thereby relieving the actor of any moral or causal responsibility.

Our rationale for including the revenge factor in the high intent

the opposite sex (low intent) or going to a bar hoping to meet their friend (high intent).

Results of the pretest indicated that this manipulation of intent had a very strong impact on perceptions of the transgressors' intent.

Revenge. Revenge was also manipulated in the scenarios. Transgressors were described as alone for the weekend because their boy/girlfriend was away for the weekend (low revenge) or had learned that their partner had been having sex with another person and went to the bar after a heated argument (high revenge).

Sex of transgressor. Sex of transgressor was also varied in the scenarios. Half the scenarios described a male transgressing while the remaining scenarios described a female transgressor.

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the confound between intent and revenge represented a threat to the internal validity of our initial study. As a consequence, causal modeling was performed twice. Causal modeling was performed, first, using the cells replicating our previous study (i.e., those cells which confounded intent and revenge; low intent-low revenge and high intent-high revenge). Causal modeling was subsequently performed using all cells in the design. If the results of the two sets of analyses differed substantially, the confound of intent and revenge in our initial investigation (Mongeau et al., 1989) study is clearly a threat to that study's internal validity.

Results

Results of the causal modeling for this study were nearly identical across sets of analyses. None of the path coefficients differed

significantly nor substantially across the two sets of analyses. Moreover, the model which best fit the data in both cases (Figure 2) was very similar to that provided in Mongeau et al. (1989). The only deviation between the earlier model and the model suggested in this follow-up is that causal responsibility was more strongly related to guilt than is predicted by the model. Once that path was added, the models fit the data extremely well.

Discussion

These results indicate that the confound of intent and revenge is not likely a threat to the internal validity of the Mongeau et al. (1989) investigation. We then turned our attention to investigate variables that could potentially moderate the relationships of intent, moral responsibility, causal responsiblity, and guilt. Three studies have been performed to date. The first (Mongeau, Hale, & Griffin, 1990) investigated the impact of alcohol on attributions. The second, (Mongeau & Hale, 1990b) investigated the impact of relational familiarity on attributions. The third study, currently in progress, investigates the impact of different types of transgressions on attributions of intent, causal responsibility, moral responsibility, and guilt.

Alcohol and Relational Transgressions (Mongeau, Hale, & Griffin,1990)

Rationale

Descriptions of transgressions in each of our previous investigations (Mongeau et al., 1989; Mongeau & Hale, 1990a), described the consumption alcohol as preceding the transgression. Alcohol is generally considered to attenuate one's inhibitions. As a consequence, it is generally

believed that people will engage in certain behaviors behaviors under the influence of alcohol that we would not engage in while sober (Critchlow, 1983, 1985).

A review of the literature indicates that the impact of alcohol consumption on the attribution of responsibility depends on the type of event produced. For studies investigating attributions following automobile accidents consumption of alcohol is positively correlated with attributed causal and moral responsiblity (Connors, Ramish, & Maisto, 1982; Pliner & Cappell, 1977). Studies investigating other events (e.g., rape and other physical abuses, streaking, and overeating) consumption of alcohol is negatively related to attributed causal and moral responsibility (e.g., Corenblum, 1983; Critchlow, 1985; Richardson & Campbell, 1982). Given that we were investigating sexual relational transgressions, we expected consumption of alcohol to be negatively related to causal responsibility. Since Critchlow, (1983) argues that the consumption of alcohol is likely to reduce one's inhibitions, alcohol should influence attributions of intent as well. Specifically, alcohol consumption should be related to reduced levels of perceived intent.

Subjects

One-hundred-ninety-one male and female undergraduates at a medium-sized Midwestern university voluntarily participated to partially fulfill a research requirement in their introductory communication classes.

Design

A 2 (intent; high or low) x 2 (consumption of alcohol; present or absent) x 2 (sex of transgressor; male or female) factorial design was was

used.

Intent. Intent was manipulated identically as in the earlier Mongeau and Hale, (1990a) investigation).

Alcohol. In the alcohol absent conditions the transgressor was described as meeting their friend at the bar (either intentionally or unintentionally) and playing pool with them while drinking soft drinks. In the alcohol present conditions, the transgressor and their partner were described as having several drinks and becoming "quite drunk."

Sex of transgressor. As in the previous investigations, sex of the transgressor was varied. Half of the transgressors were male and half the transgressors were female.

Results

Consistent with our predictions, the number of drinks that the transgressor was perceived as consuming was negatively correlated with both intent and causal responsibility. Moreover, results of the causal modeling are consistent with previous investigations (Figure 3/4). The most striking characteristic of the final causal model is the lack of a direct path between intent and moral responsibility. When included the path coefficient between intent and moral responsibility (-.02) is both very small and statistically insignificant.

Discussion

These data indicate that the consumption of alcohol is negatively related to both perceptions of a transgressor's intent as well as their moral responsibility for engaging in the behavior. This is consistent with other research relating the consumption of alcohol on attributions of

responsibility (e.g., Critchlow, 1985). The most intriguing question arising from this research is why intent is unrelated to moral responsibility. To date, we have been unable to develop an acceptable explanation for this result. This study differs from previous investigations in that the revenge motive was totally absent. The lack of revenge is unlikely the cause of this anomaly. Our previous investigation (Mongeau and Hale, 1990a) indicated that the relationship between intent and moral responsibility is not dependent on the confound of intent and revenge.

Familiarity and Relational Transgressions (Mongeau & Hale 1990b)

Rationale

In all our previous investigations, relational partners were described as in a "boyfriend-girlfriend" relationship. We reasoned that the closeness of the relationship would play an important role in attributions of moral responsibility, causal responsiblity and guilt. Miller and Steinberg (1975) argued that as relationships approach the interpersonal level, partners will abandon culturally established norms for more personal relational rules. In premarital dating relationships, one of these rules is monogamy, i.e., the promise that one will date one's partner and no one else.

Therefore, as relationships develop, it is likely that a sexual transgression, as described above, is likely to be viewed as an increasingly serious rule violations. Moreover, Cody (1982) argues that as relationships develop that a set of obligations to account for one's

actions which influence the nature of the relationship. Given that as relationships develop we have more personally invested in a relationship, we predicted that as relational closeness increased that perceptions of moral responsibility and guilt should increase as well.

Subjects

One-hundred-ninety-eight male and female undergraduates at a medium-sized Midwestern university voluntarily participated to partially fulfill a research requirement in their introductory communication courses.

Design

A 2 (intent;low, high) x 2 (familiarity; low, high) x2 (sex of transgressor; male, female) factorial independent groups design was used. Both intent and sex of transgressor was varied identically as described above (Mongeau and Hale, 1990a; Mongeau, et al., 1990).

Relational familiarity. Relational familiarity was varied in the description of the relational partners. Partners were described as having dated for either a few weeks (low familiarity) or two years (high familiarity). In the latter condition, the couple was described as considering marriage.

Results

Consistent with predictions, relational familiarity was positively related to both moral responsibility and guilt. Moreover, the causal model which best fits the data is quite consistent with those of previous investigations (Figure 4/5). There are, however, two important deviations. First, as in the alcohol study (Mongeau, et al., 1990), the path coefficient linking intent to moral responsibility is insignificant

(-.06) and was excluded from thefinal model. Second, the correlation between foreseeability and causal responsibility was stronger than predicted by the model. As a consequence, a path between these variables was inserted.

Discussion

These data indicate that as relationships develop the partners are considered more morally responsible and perceived as feeling more guilty when they break the relational rules. This is consistent with Cody's (1982) discussion of the greater responsibilities that partner's have as their relationships become more interpersonal. The implication of this addition is that when one should be able to expect the transgression as occurring that one is considered more responsible for the action.

Ancillary Issues Addressed In Previous Studies

Our discussion of this research program has focused on issues most germaine to the theme of the panel. There are ancillary issues that are quite interesting, and that reveal important information about interpersonal relationships, interpersonal communication, and interpersonal communication research. Each of these ancillary issues will be discussed briefly.

Sex differences in attributions

From the series of studies reported previously, we have written a manuscript addressing sex differences in attributions (Hale & Mongeau, 1990a). Research on the psychology and communication of sex differences has frequently addressed double standards for the sexual behavior of males and females. Those double standards have taken a variety of functional forms, e.g., rewarding male promiscuity while punishing female promiscuity, each

sex holding the other to a more sringent code of sexual conduct.

These studies allow us to test for a sexual double standard regarding sexual infidelities. By modeling the various hypothesized functional forms for sexual double standards, we were able to create competing models. Though the results across studies are not completely consistent, two conclusions seem warranted at this time. First, it is generally the case that attributions of guilt and responsibility made by female subjects do not differ for male or female transgressors. Specifically, females attribute high amounts of guilt to both male transgressors and female transgressors. A different pattern emerges for male subjects. Male subjects attribute significantly less guilt and responsibility to male transgressors than they do to female transgressors. This double standard suggests a sex of subject X sex of transgressor interaction.

Second, across each of our studies least guilt and responsibility is attributed to male transgressors. One study (Mongeau, Hale, & Griffin, 1990), reports a different double standard than the kind mentioned above. In that study a main effect for sex of transgressor emerges so that greater guilt and responsibility is attributed to female transgressors, regardless of the sex of the subject. Despite the inconsistency of these data with our other data, this second conclusion is warranted.

Communication Strategies

In each of the completed studies subjects were asked, after completing all other measures, to assume they were the transgressor described in the scenario. They were instructed told that the transgression had been discovered and were asked to encode what, if anything, they would say to

their relational partner. Three interesting results emerged across the studies.

First, in each study the overwhelming majority of subjects indicated they would be truthful and apologetic with their partners. Only a very small percentage of subjects encoded obviously deceptive responses. That finding is at odds with a significant quantity of clinical data (e.g., Pittman, 1989) which indicates that decpetion is the most often used strategy when one is confronted about an infidelity.

Second, in each study females used the consumption of alcohol to explain transgressions significantly more often than did males. There is psychological evidence that males are expected to be better able than females to "handle alcohol," and that it is more acceptable for males to become intoxicated. Recently physiological evidence confirms that ancient stereotype. It may be that males felt that explanations relying on alcohol would be not be masculine and/or would not believed.

Third, when revenge was mentioned in a scenario it was nearly always included as part of the explanation for the behavior. In that way subjects attempted to difuse responsibility for their actions.

The next portion of this paper will discuss a study that is currently being conducted. It expands both the range of transgressions explored in our research, and the range of cognitions and behaviors studied that are influenced by trangressions.

Attributions About One's Own Transgressions (Hale & Mongeau, in progress)

Rationale

Our previous studies utilize scenarios describing sexual

transgressions. This study differs from the prvious ones in two ways. First, it investigates attributions following a variety of relational transgressions. Several studies show that relational transgressions include behaviors other than sexual infidelities (e.g., McGraw, 1987; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988). We want to replicate McGraw's second study and our previous efforts by including a variety of relational transgressions. Second, we also want to study transgressions that have actually occurred, i.e., to move away from the use of scenarios. This study affords an opportunity to achieve these ends.

Subjects

Data from approximately 40 undergraduate students has been collected to date. By study's end, we hope to have a sample size of approximately 200 subjects.

Procedures

Subjects are asked to provide four types of information. First, subjects are asked to review a list of relational transgressions taken from other studies, e.g., flirting with another person, dating another person, keeping secrets from one's partner, and to rate the seriousness of each in an exclusive dating relationship. Subjects are also asked to list any relational transgressions they think of that are not on the provided list and to rate the seriousness of those transgressions.

Second, subjects are asked to describe a transgression that occurred in a relationship in they participated. They are asked to indicate whether the transgression was committed by their partner or themselves, and to indicate whether they are male or female.

Third, subjects are instructed to evaluate the transgression. Subjects answer several questions attempting to discern why the transgression occurred, and to address attributions of intent, guilt, moral responsibility, and causal responsibility. Subjects are asked to indicate what, or whom, they belive was the primary cause of the transgression.

Finally, subjects answer several questions assessing the consequences of the transgression. For example, they indicate whether the transgression produced or heightened verbal or physical conflicts, whether the transgression was a frequent topic of conversation long after it occurred, and whether it led to the termination, or redefinition of the relationship.

Disucssion

In addition to meeting the research goals spelled out in the rationale for the study, these data present at least two other interesting opportunities as well. Because subjects are evaluating the perceived seriousness of several transgressions, these data will allow us to scale the events from those that are quite serious to those that are less serious. In turn, that will allow us to assess whether the seriousness of a transgression influences attributed intent, guilt, causal responsibility and moral responsibility.

These data will also allow us to begin to explore, in a different way than have our previous efforts, the impact of transgressions on relationships, relational conflict, and relational communication.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we became interested in this area of research by reading McGraw's (1987) report which indicated that following a relational transgression that intent was inversely related to guilt. We found the counterintuitive and countertheoretical aspects of these data intriguing. We have produced four data sets investigating this relationship as well as the more general issue of how attributions produce guilt within the realm of personal relationships. Results of these studies, for the most part, are quite consistent. In all four investigations, intent is directly and inversely related to guilt. In all four investigations the path model developed in our initial study (Mongeau et al., 1989) fit the data quite well.

If the causal model were the only interesting result of these investigations, we would be well pleased. We have found, however, that communication strategies people use to explain their transgressions have been quite consistent across studies (although we have reason to doubt the validity of some strategies). Moreover, each of the investigations have produced data consistent with one or another version of the sexual double standard.

In conclusion, we have been amazed the plethora of interesting data these studies have produced. We plan to continue this line of research for the foreseeable future and invite other researchers to do the same.

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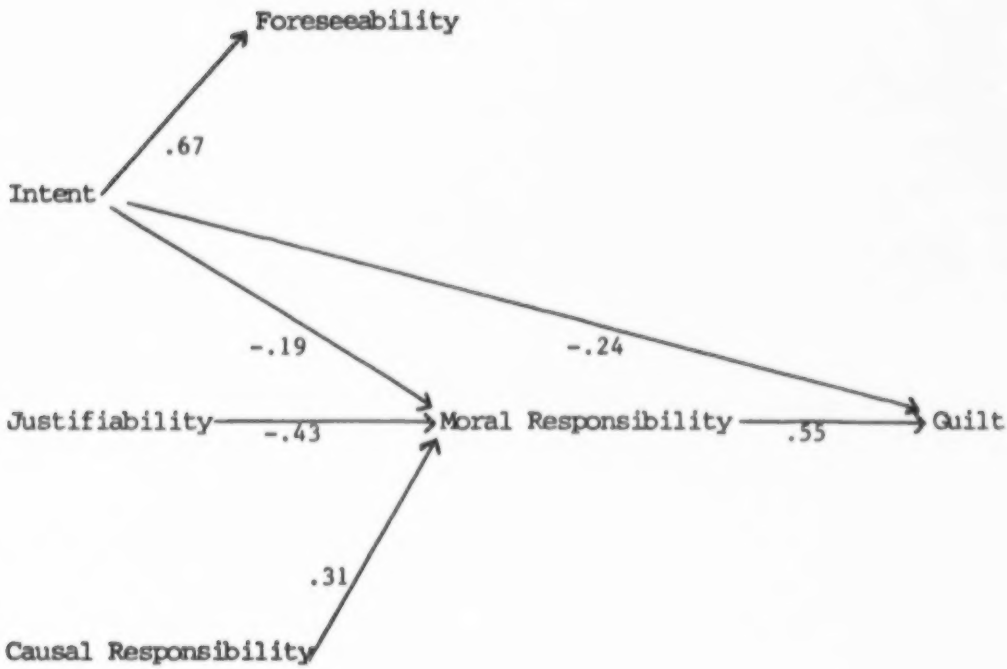
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Model hypothesized by Mongeau et al. (1989). Path coefficients from that study are included.

Figure 2. Model which best fits the data from the intent/revenge study.

Figure 3. Model which best fits the data from the alcohol and transgressions study.

Figure 4. Model which best fits the data from the familiarity and transgressions study.


Foreseeability
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Intent
-.19
-.24
Justifiability
-.43
Moral Responsibility
.55
Guilt
.31
Causal Responsibility

Figure 1.

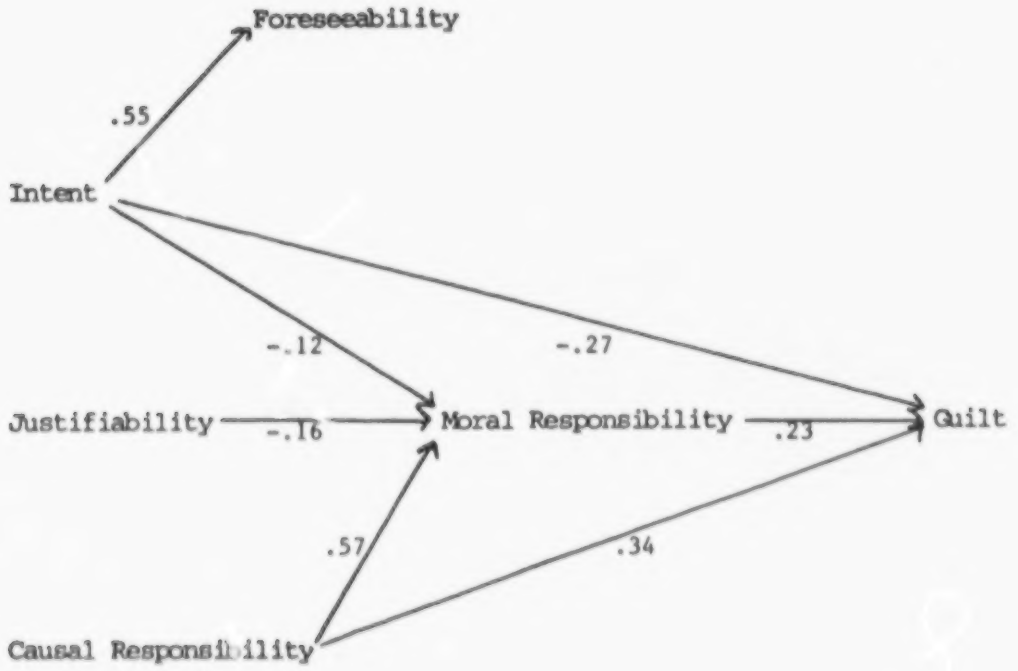
Foreseeability
.55
Intent
-.12
-.27
Justifiability
-.16
Moral Responsibility
.23
Guilt
.57
.34
Causal Responsibility

Figure 2.